The Complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas--Artur Schnabel (1932-1935)

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Artur Schnabel

Austrian pianist Artur Schnabel has been called “the man who invented Beethoven”... a strange thing to say considering Schnabel was born more than half a century after Beethoven, universally recognized as the greatest composer in Europe, died in 1827. What, then, did Artur Schnabel invent?

The 32 piano sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) represent one of the great artistic achievements in human history, and stand as the musical autobiography of the great composer's maturity, from his 25th until his 53rd year, four years before his death. The fruit of those years mark a staggering creative journey that began and ended in the composer's adopted home of Vienna, “Music Central” to the German-speaking world. Beethoven's musical path led from the domain of Haydn and Mozart to the world of his late period, when the agonizing progress of his deafness had become complete. By then, Beethoven's musical narrative had begun to speak a new language, proceeding according to a new logic that left many listeners behind.

While the beauties of his music and his deep genius were generally recognized, at the same time, it was thought by some critics that Beethoven frequently smudged things up with his overly-bold, unfettered invention, even well before his final period:

> Beethoven, who is often bizarre and baroque, takes at times the majestic flight of an eagle, and then creeps in rocky pathways. He first fills the soul with sweet melancholy, and then shatters it by a mass of shattered chords. He seems to harbor together doves and crocodiles. (Tablettes de Polymnie, Paris, 1810)

Beethoven's 32 sonatas did not immediately take the world by storm, though some were played in public, particularly “marquee” sonatas such as the “Pathétique,” “Moonlight,” and “Appassionata,” all wonderful music. But already in the late 19th century the bulk of Beethoven's piano sonatas were neglected, even in his own Vienna. It would appear that the Great 32 was ripe for invention.

Enter Artur Schnabel. Born in Lipnik, Austria, on 17 April, 1882, Schnabel was sent to Vienna at age seven to study with Hans Schmitt of the Vienna Conservatory. After remaining with Schmitt for three years, Schnabel graduated to the most celebrated piano professor in the world, Theodor Leschetizky (1830-1915), also in Vienna. Leschetizky had studied with Carl Czerny (1791-1857), who had been a student, assistant and close friend of Beethoven's.

Despite his connection to Beethoven, Leschetizky's mandate as a teacher was to prepare the world's most talented pianists for a repertoire that would enhance their professional careers, which included the so-called "virtuoso" repertoire. But Leschetizky did not teach his students to become note-producing machines, or to copy novel effects from others. Artur Schnabel remembers: "He succeeded in releasing all the vitality and *élan* and sense of beauty a student had in his nature, and would not tolerate any deviation or violation of what he felt to be truthfulness of expression."

Leschetizky expected his students to be themselves, to recognize and develop their own sense of musicality--to play "truthfully."

Leschetizky was soon made aware of Schnabel's musical proclivities. Though Schnabel could play anything, he fell under the spell of the Austro-German repertoire. Leschetizky famously told Schnabel, "You will never be a pianist--you are a musician!" and promptly recommended the virtually unknown sonatas of Franz Schubert to his young student.

During Artur Schnabel's early years of touring, his programs were what we might call "well rounded," but this began to change, as he grew to rely on his truthful center of gravity:

> I have played almost all the works of Schumann; very often, Liszt's Sonata in B minor. I have played contemporary music, particularly chamber music [Schnabel was a serious composer; his music, composed in a quite advanced style, has been getting some attention in the 21st century]; but when one gets older one has to live an intensive life. The extensive life, all winds blowing "round our noses," belongs to youth... now I am attracted to music which I consider better than it can be performed.

Schnabel also began to rely on his wife, Therese Behr, a contralto lieder singer with a deep understanding of musical expression, and with whom he concertized. It was Chopin who said, "If you want to know how to play my melodies, sing them." Therese was a significant influence on Schnabel's transformation into the Schnabel we know from his recordings.

Schnabel began to be identified as "the Beethoven player" (after, significantly, he had been "the Brahms player" and "the Schubert player"). Artur Schnabel was not identified successively as a Brahms, Schubert and Beethoven player simply because he featured those composers in his programs. Other fine pianists were also known for their Beethoven. But Schnabel played as only Schnabel could.

And yes, there IS a difference! The listener perceives it from the very first notes. His Beethoven sonata performances are memorable not because his playing was driven by an external knowledge of their formal structure, or their *"Sitz im Leben,"* all of which he well understood. It

is because Schnabel grasped the music from the inside out. Schnabel's playing of the sonatas emanates completely from the musical present. He is not recreating symbols he has read in the score, but creates the music with striking immediacy exactly when you hear it, an effect that is impossible to miss.

For Schnabel, the effect was everything, and he brought his great intellectual mastery and deep insight into play to produce it. No matter that these recordings are as well known for their occasional technical lapses as for their otherwise superlative level of performance. The effect is always made, and a bit of noble struggle only enhances the humanity--and excitement--of Schnabel's achievement. Beethoven himself was said not to have always given thoroughly polished performances of his works, yet his playing made a thrilling effect upon his audience. And do not doubt it—Schnabel overwhelmingly plays with precision and clarity; he owns that inimitable sound.

Schnabel's melodies sing out as if etched in the air, his gradations of touch and pedaling are many and miraculous, often resulting from subtleties of touch that appear almost surreptitiously, while communicating the crucial effect. Schnabel was a master of true "orchestral" playing--carefully layering the discreet lines in the music, down to the most extreme pianissimo, to make heard what Beethoven took the trouble to write. Schnabel gives every line its own character, without allowing it to disappear into the indistinct background from neglect or inattention. We don't have to seek out any particular Schnabel sonata recording to best illustrate this, as he felt that while each sonata is decidedly unique: "... nearly *all* his works are of equal greatness. His nine symphonies, his sixteen quartets, almost all of his thirty-two piano sonatas are actually *of the same quality*, even in spite of the fact that they were composed throughout his whole life."

In 1927, the centenary of Beethoven's death was observed by musicians the world over. Schnabel marked the occasion by performing in Berlin all 32 sonatas in seven recitals, a feat he accomplished three more times in his life.

Still, the masterful and inspired body of music that Beethoven created in his piano sonatas remained unknown to most music lovers. Lucky concert-goers heard Schnabel play them, or heard other competent pianists play the few that were regularly programmed or committed to recordings. But the monument to the piano erected by Beethoven over the course of 30 bountiful years was heard only in magnificent bits and pieces.

Soon after Schnabel's traversal of the Beethoven sonatas in Berlin, the great depression struck, and businesses experienced a precipitous decrease in profits. Record companies suffered along with the rest, as sales plummeted. The British label HMV made plans to offer the relatively well-heeled classical music consumers, by advance subscription, recordings of "works or groups of musical works that appeal in the first instance more to the cultivated than to the general musical taste." These were the "Society" recordings.

The first, the Hugo Wolf Society, appeared in 1931, to produce recordings--many of them first recordings--of songs by Wolf. Less than a year later, the Beethoven Society was formed, with the aim of recording the complete piano sonatas as played by Artur Schnabel.

Securing Schnabel for the project was something of a coup, as Schnabel's only “recordings” to that time were a group of reproducing piano rolls he had made for companies in Germany and America between 1905 and 1922. It is said that when the Aeolian Duo-Art company asked Schnabel to record some rolls for them, they assured him that their instruments could reproduce 16 gradations of “touch.” Schnabel is said to have retorted, “I have seventeen.” He never made rolls for Duo-Art, but did make some for the rival Ampico company, who is suspected of inventing the apparently unfounded “diss” aimed at Duo-Art.

Schnabel was not eager to record discs, and gave two reasons for his disinclination, the first somewhat surprising, and the second quite natural: “I did not like the idea of having no control over the people who listened to music which I performed--not knowing how they would be dressed, what else they would be doing at the same time, how much they would listen. Also I felt that recordings are against the very nature of performance, for the nature of performance is to happen but once.”

No shorts and sandals--or worse!--for Schnabel's Beethoven.

Eventually, Schnabel agreed to record the sonatas for HMV's Beethoven Society, as he felt that their value would justify them. He apparently had no idea of the tension he was letting himself in for. In order to record, say, a 12-minute movement of a sonata, three separate ca. four minute takes had to be set down, with each take covering one side of the 78 disc. Suitable breaks in the music, where one side ends and the next begins, had to be carefully worked out.

Artur Schnabel arrived at the Abbey Road Studio No. 3 in London on January 21, 1932 and sat down at his preferred Bechstein piano to begin recording the complete Beethoven piano sonatas for the first time in history. The first sonata he recorded, No. 31 in A flat, Op. 110, appears to have gone swimmingly. The sonata was to fit on six sides (three records). During the session, one side, the second movement, was given the designation H30: “Hold for 30 days,” while the movement was given a “take 2.” That second take was accepted and ultimately used, along with the other successful sides, to make the masters from which the actual discs were pressed. All the other sides were one-take affairs. A total of seven takes for six sides--not bad! An auspicious beginning to a great project.

Problems began to appear during the next two sonatas, Op. 90 and Op. 111, scheduled for that opening day. The problems included adjustments in the side-break placement. Schnabel returned for the next session on February 3, when he fixed up and completed Op. 90, but a new sonata, op. 26, had to be scrapped after eight takes, and was re-recorded exactly one year later. Op. 111 was still unfinished.

During five consecutive days, March 21-25, beginning with Schnabel's third session, the pianist worked on five sonatas and recorded two Beethoven concertos, comprising 118 separate takes, of which only 41 were deemed suitable as masters. Schnabel's wife Therese, back home in Berlin, received a letter from her husband on March 26 that reads, in part:

> …. This week was an ordeal, a torture chamber. “What does not kill me makes me stronger,” says Nietzsche. Hopefully (probably) this is true. I had no idea of how

> outrageous a process the recording on discs could be. Like slave drivers they burdened me with six hours of recording on a daily basis. I had to play pieces that were not included in the contract, but I had no time to prepare them. They thought I was always able to play all the Beethoven sonatas and concertos at the drop of a hat. Instead of refusing to do anything that was not prearranged, I let them, as usual, cajole me into doing it.... The act of violence against humans is mainly caused by the imperfection of the machine, which he has created. For example: one can only play for four minutes. In these four minutes sometimes 2000 or more keys are hit. If two of them are unsatisfactory you have to repeat all of the 2000. In the repeat the first faulty notes are corrected but two others are not satisfactory, so you must play all 2000 once again. You do it ten times, always with a sword of Damocles over your head. Finally you give up and 20 bad notes are left in it. I am physically and mentally too weak for this process and was close to a breakdown. I began to cry when I was alone in the street. Never before had I felt deeper loneliness. My conscience tortured me. Succumbing to evil, the betrayal of life, the marriage by death. It is perfect nonsense, totally unnatural. Depravity....

It is astonishing that under this mental stress, Schnabel's recordings from these early sessions are played with searing involvement, profound spirituality, and hair-trigger humor.

Artur Schnabel recovered from this early jolt, and became acclimated to the recording process. Principal recording of the Beethoven sonatas was completed in November of 1935, with some touch-up recording accomplished in 1937. The Beethoven Society recordings began to be issued that very March of 1932. The twelfth and final volume was sent out to subscribers in 1937. The project was so successful that Schnabel recorded more Beethoven for the Society, adding the Bagatelles, Diabelli Variations , and other short compositions. (Some short Beethoven pieces had already been used as side-fillers in the sonata sets.)

Schnabel continued to record, in England and America, producing magnificent readings of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Brahms, Schumann and Dvorak, including chamber music and concertos. His final recording took place in Abbey Road's Studio No. 3 on June 13, 1950. He played Bach.

Artur Schnabel’s Beethoven Society sets were re-issued on LP records, housed in a large clamshell-style box that also contained the two volumes of his fascinating edition of the Beethoven Sonatas. Schnabel's Beethoven recordings have, of course, appeared on numerous CD reissues.

Not to conclude without answering the question, “What, then, did Artur Schnabel invent?” Why, he invented himself, of course!

James Irsay studied piano with Sascha Gorodnitzki, Jorge Bolet and John Ogdon. His weekly radio program over WBAI-FM 99.5 in New York City, “Morning Irsay,” features historical classical recordings and rambling commentary. All Schnabel quotes in this essay are from “My Life and Music” by Artur Schnabel (1970).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.